

The administration as social disease.

The following has been triggered by local circumstances. It is, however, written in English because the problem in question is not a specifically Dutch one.

For reasons that are quite understandable — and probably even respectable — our government would like to have a clearer picture of how and where the research potential at the Dutch Universities — which are all state-supported — is spent. In response to that desire, the Dutch Universities have set up mechanisms intended for surveying, evaluating, and possibly controlling the research carried out on their premises. To the merely orderly mind, this seems utterly reasonable and, on the whole, the effort is carried out with the best of intentions. The question to be raised is whether the best of intentions suffice or — more poignantly — whether all those good intentions may not do more harm than good.

I am forced to raise such doubts when I confront what I am observing with what I am convinced of, viz. that we have no reason to expect our conclusions and decisions to be any better than the language in which we talked and thought about them.

In the language in which the whole procedure has to be carried out, the - so-called or would-be - notion of a "project" plays a central rôle. The underlying ideas are very simple. If you want to achieve something, you should be able to state in advance what you would like to achieve and how much the effort is going to cost you, and at yearly intervals you should be able to describe the progress you have made. By stating both in objective, "evaluatable", terms, you should enable the committee in question to decide whether your "project" is worth tackling and whether your progress is up to par. As I said, the underlying ideas are very simple; the trouble is that they are no good.

Firstly, if a reviewing frequency of once a year is appropriate in some cases, it must be absolutely inappropriate in many other cases, because research efforts extend over periods of time ranging from a rainy afternoon to quite a few years.

Secondly, only a fraction of our research efforts can be adequately couched in the format of "projects". It can be done with an expedition to observe an eclipse in order to test a prediction from the theory of relativity, but it is almost impossible for those efforts that start with someone smelling a rat.

Smells are notoriously hard to describe, and the project framework therefore requires him to describe in advance the general shape of the rat he is after.

Thirdly, the goal of consensus — "the peer group", etc. — is a well-documented mistake. Such a consensus can only be reached at pretty homogeneous levels of concern and abstraction, whereas originality often requires a drastic departure from them in order to give profound attention to what all the others ignore.

Fourthly, the whole reviewing machinery has been built upon the tacit assumption that we have means, sufficiently objective to be operational, for establishing whether performance has been up to par, whereas we all know that we have not. The yardstick Academic administrations love most of all is the publication list, since it is supposed to be so objective. Knowing what the Publish-or-Perish-syndrome has done to the level of our scientific journals, we can only deplore the wide-spread adoption of that yardstick, the more so because we know that, though objective, the measure is pretty irrelevant. The number of papers a man submits is not a useful measure of his achievements, nor is the number of papers accepted. There are plenty of honourable reasons

for not rushing into print. It may also be impossible to submit a paper because the appropriate journal has yet to be founded. When the appropriate journals exist, their editorial boards may refuse a paper because the boards don't want to frighten their readership. (I even know of a paper that was refused — by a German journal! — because it presented a solution that was deemed too simple to be worth publishing.) Alternatively one can look at the length of someone's entry in the Citation Index; the measure is equally objective and equally irrelevant.

The superficial reader of the above will conclude that in my opinion no research scientist should be held accountable for his work, but nothing could be farther from the truth. (In any case each scientist should hold himself accountable.) Exactly because this is serious matter I object to carrying it out in a Newspeak that makes it an Orwellian farce we can only survive by dressing things up in yet another layer of dishonesty.

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